

Hawaiians hope for rebirth as U.S. Navy returns island

By Associated Press

Published November 11, 2003

KAHOOLAWE ISLAND, Hawaii - Spotted with patches of dry grass and colored by thorny kiawe trees that thrive in the arid landscape, the red dirt of this former Navy target range supports little other vegetation, and even less wildlife.

But the uninhabited 45 square miles of Kahoolawe are sacred to native Hawaiians who feel the island, untouched by tourists, connects them with the spirits of their ancestors.

Now, after spending 10 years and \$460-million to clean up a half century's worth of shrapnel and unexploded bombs, the Navy is returning control of Kahoolawe to the Hawaiians for the first time since the attack on Pearl Harbor.

The transfer will take place today, Veterans Day.

More than a decade after the last round of ammunition was fired, native Hawaiians are preparing for what they hope will be the rebirth of the island as a place where their cultural traditions can be celebrated.

"You can get a feel on Kahoolawe of what it was like to live on Hawaii at the time of our ancestors," said Davianna McGregor, a native Hawaiian with the cultural preservation group Protect Kahoolawe Ohana. "It's important for us to have a place where we can practice our traditions without it being a spectacle, without it being some kind of tourist attraction.

"It's one place we can go to be in communion with our natural life forces."

The island and its more than 600 archaeological and culturally significant sites are on the National Register of Historic Places. Sites include old houses, religious artifacts, shrines, remnants of ranches and a centuries-old quarry.

The island will be set aside for cultural, education and archaeological activities, with no commercial development, and access to Kahoolawe will be controlled by a state agency.

Six miles southwest of Maui, Kahoolawe (kah-HOH-oh-LAH-vay) is the smallest of the eight major Hawaiian islands. It is 11 miles long and seven miles wide. The Navy has controlled Kahoolawe since martial law was declared after the Dec. 7, 1941, Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

It was a target and training area until 1990, when President George H.W. Bush ordered a halt to the exercises after years of protests and lawsuits by native Hawaiians. Congress later agreed to clean up the place and return it to local control.

Cleanup crews have removed some 11,000 tires and about 9-million pounds of scrap metal - enough steel to construct a frigate and a destroyer, according to the Navy.

"It's a tremendous amount of material and a tremendous tribute to the folks that have worked out here" on the cleanup, said Rear Adm. Barry McCullough, commander of Navy Region Hawaii.

But the effort is not complete. As of Oct. 31, about three-quarters of the island has been cleared of unexploded ordnance, according to the Navy.

The Navy is set to leave for good on March 12, but will return to clean up any dangerous materials found. "There's no way that they can go back to that date when everything went wrong to redo it, so what's done is done," said Pam Waterhouse, who has worked on the cleanup. "This certainly is a step in the right direction."

For the past two decades, the Navy has allowed monthly access to the island for religious purposes. "It's a very deep cultural experience when people come to Kahoolawe," McGregor said. "It's really transformative. Kahoolawe is a very special place."